

# Victorian Studies Association of Ontario



## September 2011

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### **The President's Message**

It is a beautiful fall day as I write; Autumn has laid considerably more than a finger on the leaves, but enough of them are still left to promise spectacular foliage for any of you who are able to get out of doors to see it over the upcoming Thanksgiving weekend, as I hope to. The VSAO presidency, though, discourages living in only one season at a time; as you will see elsewhere in this newsletter, the updates we have for you refer rather to the winter and to the spring. I am very happy to announce the plans are well under way for two evening lectures early in 2012. Jennifer Esmail, of Wilfrid Laurier U, has kindly agreed to give a talk in Toronto on March 7, with a time, place, and topic to be announced shortly. And in Ottawa, Keith Wilson will be speaking on Thomas Hardy's letters, at a time later in the winter term—more details on that event will also be forthcoming. Planning for the spring conference, to be held at Glendon College, York University, on April 28th, is also well under way. We are very fortunate that two distinguished Victorianists, Kathy Psomiades of Duke University and Audrey Jaffe from the U of Toronto, have agreed to give plenary addresses. The conference theme will be "Victorian Thresholds: Between Culture and Anthropology"; a formal call for papers will appear later in the fall, but I hope this will serve as advance notice and prompt any members who have work they wish to present to hold the date and plan to join us in Toronto.

With best wishes to all,

Matthew Rowlinson  
Department of English and Centre for Theory and Criticism,  
University of Western Ontario

### **Summary of VSAO/ACCUTE Panel**

“The Tide that Binds: Exploring the Victorian Coast,”

28 May 2011, Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences,  
University of New Brunswick and St. Thomas University.

The VSAO was fortunate this year to have a strong joint panel with the Association of Canadian College and University Teachers of English at the Congress. Rebecca Beusaert from York University gave a fascinating paper, “‘Where the Bathers Love to Dip and the Rowers Love to Row’: Late-Nineteenth and Early-Twentieth Century Female Tourists in Elora, Ontario, Canada.” She demonstrated how tensions around class and gender shaped the construction of Elora as a “coastal” town suitable for vacationing women. In “Seascape and Mindscape: Coleridge’s ‘Rime’ and the Legacy of its Illustrated Editions” Suzanne Stuart from Mount Allison University showed how fruitful it is to read the illustrated editions of the “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” asynchronously. Sara Malton had to send her regrets, but Constance Crompton, the VSAO moderator, read her paper, “Rough Water: Naval Impressment and Nineteenth-Century Cultural Memory” to the very appreciative audience. Drawing on Hardy and Gaskell, Sara Malton exposed how impressment erased the individual from history in the service of building the state.

### **Constance Crompton**

### **Two Calls for Papers**

VSAO annual conference (due 28 January 2012)

The annual Congress conference (due 20 November 2012)

### **CFP: VSAO 45th Annual Conference, 28 April 2012, York University**

In keeping with the conference theme, “Victorian Thresholds: Between Literature and Anthropology,” the VSAO executive invites abstracts for papers to be presented at our morning panel. Please send electronic copies of proposals (300-500 words) and a brief biographical statement to Matthew Rowlinson ([mrowlins@uwo.ca](mailto:mrowlins@uwo.ca)) by 28 January 2012. Alternatively, hard copies can be sent by mail to Matthew Rowlinson / Department of English / University of Western Ontario/ London, ON N6A 3K7 (or IUTS).

### **CFP: VSAO/ACCUTE Joint Panel , Annual Congress for the Humanities and Social Sciences 28 – 31 May, Wilfrid Laurier University and the University of Waterloo**

Congress is in Ontario next year at the Wilfrid Laurier and Waterloo campuses. The VSAO looks forward to welcoming Victorianists from across Canada. The call is out for papers for the 2012 VSAO/ACCUTE panel, "Victorian Hesitations: Indeterminacy in Language, Art, and Politics." Interested scholars are invited to respond to the CFP, with the deadline extended to 20 November.



Victorian Studies Association of Ontario/ Assoc. of Canadian  
College and University Teachers of English - Joint Panel  
Fiona Coll and Constance Crompton

### Victorian Hesitations: Indeterminacy in Language, Art, and Politics

*For knowing his way he is answerable, and therefore [the young artist] must not  
walk doubtfully... he may pause, but he must not hesitate.*

*Ruskin, Modern Painters*

*Lord Harrington's conduct seems to give signs of hesitation.*

*The Nation, April 1886*

The Victorian ethos is often understood to have been based upon action, expansion, and initiative. However, behind all the evidence of Victorian vim and vigour lie traces of equivocation, vacillation, and indecision. From the Crown's factual reluctance to make Cameroon a British protectorate to Lady Bracknell's fictional admonition against irresolution in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, a concern with hesitation marks the prose and policy of the era. This panel invites papers that explore suspended moments in Victorian culture – moments when a delay, however long, was of real consequence. How did the Victorians understand hesitation? How did they weigh the ethics of equivocation against the virtues of candor? How did their moments of uncertainty manifest themselves in movement? How was the difference between deliberation and doubt calibrated in this age of enterprise?

Papers may focus on, but need not be limited to:

Anxiety	Prevarication
Contemplation	Reconsideration
Deliberation	Reflection
Doubt	Reluctance
Dubiety	Restriction
Irrresolution	Stillness
Meditation	Suspense
Pause	

Following the instructions on the ACCUTE website (under Conference) for joint association sessions, send your 700-word proposal (or 8-10 page double-spaced paper), a 100-word abstract, a 50-word biographical statement, and the submitter information form (<http://www.accute.ca/generalcall.html#submit>), to Constance Crompton at [VSAOatACCUTE@gmail.com](mailto:VSAOatACCUTE@gmail.com) by November 15th.

**Forum: Victorian Victuals – Everyday Reality to Literary Tropes**

## “Alimentary Semantics: Eating and Meaning ‘it’ in Wonderland”

**Abigail Dennis**, Doctoral student, University of Toronto

The persistent alimentary imagery iterated throughout *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) signals Lewis Carroll’s vivid sense of both the quotidian bizarre, and the existential perils of appetite. As Harold Bloom observes, Wonderland is “natural—all-too-natural—which is to say: hungry.” In Wonderland, food *is* meaning. It defines personhood, defines the subject, and determines perspective, as the Duck, encountered by Alice in the Pool of Tears, suggests during an argument over the definition of the word “it”: “‘I know what “it” means well enough, when *I* find a thing,’ said the Duck: ‘it’s generally a frog, or a worm.’” Language and meaning for the Duck are defined by the parameters of survival, and thus by access to food. The facility with which the Duck is able to undermine the anthropocentric assumptions of language foreshadows the dizzying set-piece of topsy-turvy linguistic play that is the Mad Hatter’s tea-party, where the following interchange initiates the subversion of both conventional rules of signification, and the laws of predation:

“You should say what you mean,” the March Hare went on.  
“I do,” Alice hastily replied; ‘at least, I mean what I say—that’s the same thing, you know.’”

“Not the same thing a bit!” said the Hatter. “Why, you might just as well say that ‘I see what I eat’ is the same thing as ‘I eat what I see!’”

The vertiginous rhetorical inversion played out here enacts one of *Alice in Wonderland’s* central projects: it makes us question the way we *see* our food.

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“‘When Want is keenly felt and Abundance rejoices’: Food-Related Themes in Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*”

**Peter Duerr**, Assistant Librarian, York University

In this essay, I will be looking at the many instances of food and associated items present in *A Christmas Carol*. Examples start in the first few pages and can be found throughout the book.

The two dutiful gentlemen who come canvassing for a charitable cause at Scrooge’s office are “endeavouring to raise a fund to buy the Poor some meat and drink.” All levels of society are planning for the Christmas feast from the Lord Mayor in his Mansion with his fifty cooks on down to the lowly tailor who tends to his family’s poor pudding in his garret.

Underneath Scrooge's dwelling are chambers where a wine-merchant stores his casks and his fireplace has antique tiles illustrated with biblical tales including the Apostles going off to sea in "butter boats."

When confronted by Marley's Ghost, Scrooge makes light of it by stating it is more likely due to indigestion, "a bit of beef ... an underdone potato"; he even says that if he but swallowed his toothpick, "a legion of goblins" would plague him!

There are frequent occasions where foodstuffs and those who produce them are vital ingredients to joyous gatherings and a well functioning society.

The warehouse dance, so happily remembered by Scrooge, was well provisioned with beef, cake, mince-pies, negus, beer, and even porter to revive the talented, hard-playing fiddler. Mr. Fizziwig has included his own workers but also has invited the local baker, cook, and milkman. At Belle's house, Scrooge's ex-fiancée, when her husband returns with presents for their delighted children, gives one of them a doll's frying pan and small, wooden turkey on a platter.

When the Ghost of Christmas Present appears, he is surrounded by all manner of eatables; meat, fowl, game, fish, plum puddings, oranges, lemons, nuts, bowls of punch, and large twelfth-cakes form his throne. His torch is in the shape of "Plenty's Horn," a pagan reference to the cornucopia carried by the goddess Ceres, the god of agriculture.

While taking Scrooge to his clerk's house, they pass by the food markets, the poulterers, the fruiterers, the grocers, and here Dickens waxes eloquently on the array of goods available for the Christmas feasts. The Spanish Onions are like Spanish Friars, winking slyly at young women as they walk by, the filberts reminding customers of forest walks in fallen tree leaves, and the candied fruits are so deliciously laden with sugar that onlookers almost feel faint at the sight of them.

In comparison to such plenty, the meagre Christmas dinner at the Cratchits falls well below the bounty of the well stocked shops. The family fills up with the cheaper potatoes, gravy, the sage and onion stuffing, and applesauce. Yet they are all delighted with the meal. Everyone had the rare treat of a goose, a magnificent (though smallish) Christmas pudding due to Mrs. Cratchit's exacting care, lemon and gin punch, apples, oranges, and roasted chestnuts.

Farther down the scale, even the above repast would seem abundant; the two wardens of the lighthouse only have a can of grog to wish each other Merry Christmas.

At Fred's house, few details emerge about the young couple's dinner, but it is clear from the atmosphere of complete and congenial contentment that everyone was satisfied. After the main courses, dessert has been placed on the table, a bottle was passed around for everyone to fill their glass, and tea was served.

Although the theme of food is most often seen as joyful and pleasant, instances appear where this is not the case. Scrooge is remarked to be “solitary as an oyster” and the financier wishes that he who embraces the typical happy view of the season “should be boiled with his own pudding.” The eerie luminescence of Marley’s face on the door knocker is likened to a rotting lobster in the dark. The miserliness of Scrooge is underscored by the small pan of gruel on the hob in his room, a thin mixture of oats with water, common fare for those condemned to workhouses.

When visiting his own broken down school with the First Spirit, Scrooge’s academy is described as looking not having “too much to eat” with “an empty store-house.” When the Schoolmaster offers a glass of refreshment to the postboy who will drive Scrooge home, the servant declines, saying that “if it was the same tap as he had tasted before, he had rather not.” One of the boys who attended Fezziwig’s holiday merriment is “suspected as not having board from his maste.” Mrs. Cratchit when called upon to toast Scrooge as the benefactor of their revels angrily declares that she would give him a piece of her “mind to feast upon” and hoped “he’d have a good appetite for it.”

In one of the starkest instances, the Ghost of Christmas Present shows Scrooge two monstrous children: a boy who is Ignorance and a girl known as Want. Based on their withered and wasted forms, it can be assumed they have been starved of essentials like many of the Victorian poorer classes. The Ghost says that they belong to mankind and that the children look to him for aid.

With the arrival the third visitor, the Ghost of Christmas Future, Scrooge is taken to the Royal Exchange, the financial centre and source of his fortune. The money lender overhears a macabre discussion. A notable member of the Exchange has died and the only way one of the well heeled party can be persuaded to attend the funeral (which turns out to be Scrooge’s) is if luncheon will be served! In a similar vein, the overcrowded cemetery where Scrooge’s grave is located is described as being “fat with repleted appetite.”

All of these connotations, however, are quite dispersed by Ebenezer’s reformation at the end. His whole-hearted adoption of both the form and spirit of the Christmas holiday demonstrates this.

After waking up alive, his very first action is to recruit a young boy to fetch the Poulterer to his house; Scrooge must have the prize turkey delivered to Bob Cratchit in Camden town and it is sent forthwith. He also gives (and astonishes) the gentleman canvasser a very substantial donation to the fund for the poor which ensures many poor will have their “meat and drink.” On another social level, he makes amends with his young nephew and partakes of both the fine dinner-fare arranged by the nephew’s wife and the general festivities at their party.

By insisting on a wholly voluntary and costly gift of immense proportions to his underpaid clerk (with an underfed family), Ebenezer Scrooge shows he can properly fulfill his duties as an employer. In donating money to a charitable fund, he ensures that he helps the more unfortunate in his world. Attending his relative’s dinner party, Scrooge reconnects with the necessary element of society, that of combining fellowship with sustenance. These important

gestures can more than make up for his earlier lapses on financial, personal, and culinary fronts.

In summary, food tropes can be readily found in every stave of *A Christmas Carol* and exist on many levels. The ample provision of nourishment in a commonly shared environment sustains our civic sense of self as well as enabling our personal growth and happiness. Should we deny this provision for ourselves or those among us, both our society as a whole and as individuals will suffer from greater isolation, a lack of compassion, and a more general stunting of the human potential.